

# **CHIEF FIRE OFFICER QUALIFICATIONS**

## **EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The problem is that no information exists concerning what current qualifications are being advertised for chief fire officers or whether this information has changed in the last five years. The purpose of this research was to discover current advertised qualifications for chief fire officers and to compare those advertised qualifications to those of five years ago. This study uses descriptive and historical research methodology. The research questions were: 1) What are the commonly advertised qualifications for chief fire officers? 2) Have those qualifications changed in the last five years? 3) Is Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) completion or participation, as an advertised qualification for chief fire officers, changing? The results of this study were that college degrees (Associate, Bachelor, Masters), fields of study (Fire Science and Fire Administration, Public Administration, Business Administration), supervisory or command experience and emergency medical experience are commonly advertised qualifications for chief fire officers. The qualifications have not changed but the percentages associated with them have. EFOP completion or participation, as an advertised qualification for chief fire officers, has changed in the five years covered in the comparison. The percentage of the EFOP being preferred as a qualification has increased 17.69%. Recommendations are: Chief fire officers should as a minimum have a Bachelors degree in Fire Science, Fire Administration, Public Administration, or Business Administration. Chief fire officers should have as a minimum seven to eight years of supervisory or command experience. Chief fire officers should have experience or certificates in emergency medical services. Chief fire officers should attend and graduate from the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The problem is that no information exists concerning what current qualifications are being advertised for chief fire officers or whether this information has changed in the last five years. The purpose of this research is to discover current advertised qualifications for chief fire officers and to compare those advertised qualifications to those of five years ago. This study uses descriptive and historical research methodology. The research questions are:

1. What are the commonly advertised qualifications for chief fire officers?
2. Have those qualifications changed in the last five years?
3. Is Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) completion or participation, as an advertised qualification for chief fire officers, changing?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The author is the Chief of Department/District Manager of the South Metropolitan Fire Protection District (SMFPD). The SMFPD is a suburban combination department that borders Kansas City, Missouri on the south. The fire district is an independent political subdivision of the State of Missouri and is governed by a three member elected board of directors. It encompasses two cities and unincorporated areas that have a combined population of approximately twenty thousand citizens. The District responds to approximately twenty-one hundred calls annually of which seventy percent plus are emergency medical in nature. The District has thirty-nine full time employees and an annual budget over 2.3 million dollars. The SMFPD has three advanced life support ambulances and bills for transport. Additionally, it has one of only a few fire organization based paramedic training programs in the State of Missouri. It is located in a rapidly

growing area. The Fire District has emphasized and incorporated custom and community service into its mission.

The District shares a majority of its population with the largest city within its boundaries. For the past eighteen months there has been political strife between the city government, the fire district board and the fire chief. The city administrator has been fired and rehired over his opposition to a community service initiative by the fire district concerning the filling of swimming pools by the fire district. This has culminated in a recall petition and election to be held for two of the three board members. The local union has supported the election of one board member who has opposed the other two and the fire chief. Negotiations of a new union agreement with the fire district are underway. Additionally, a federal lawsuit has been filed against the fire district, two of its board members and the fire chief. Finally, the assistant chief was charged with a sex crime and the district's board of directors bought out his contract.

The author applied for and was accepted into the EFOP. This occurred after consultation with mentors and peers in the ranks of chief fire officers. Almost all of the author's advisers, who were graduates of or participants in the EFOP, stated that there were significant career and developmental reasons for pursuing the completion of the EFOP. Advisors outside of the program were more skeptical. The pros and cons of participation and completion of EFOP will not be elaborated upon. However, in light of the generally accepted statement that the average tenure of a chief officer at any given organization is five years, an examination of what the present advertised qualifications for employment as a chief fire officer is in order. Of particular interest is the status of EFOP completion or participation among these qualifications. Will the EFOP program

help the chief fire officer get a job? It is difficult to practice the skills learned in the EFOP courses without being employed by a fire or emergency agency unless one wishes to adapt them to organizations outside of fire and emergency services.

The significance of this study to the SMFPD is two fold. The first is the identification of common qualifications for chief fire officers as perceived by other fire agencies. This is obtained by the importance of those qualifications as seen by their placement in employment advertisements. This is important by giving the fire district an objective means of evaluating present and future chief officer applicants by their measurable qualifications. Secondly, the SMFPD can assess present and future participation in the EFOP program for its present and future chief officers by its presence as a qualification for employment with other fire agencies.

This study is also of significance to the National Fire Academy and the individual chief fire officer. The National Fire Academy needs a means of evaluating the importance of its EFOP to the nation's city and county officials. The inclusion of the EFOP as a qualification for employment is one of those means. The individual chief fire officer can use both the commonly advertised qualifications and EFOP inclusion in making plans for professional and career development.

This applied research is related to the Executive Leadership course. The examination of the contemporary public sector and fire service issue of current chief fire officer qualifications and specifically the EFOP both enhance the officer's ability to perform at the executive level.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A large majority of paid positions at the chief fire officer level are likely to be advertised, whether for legal reasons (Data Research, 1994; Fournier, 1994; Hogan, 1995) or for purposes of fiduciary responsibility and sound management practice (cf. Graham & Hayes, 1993; Klingner & Nalbandian, 1993; or Lawton & McKevitt, 1994). A comprehensive survey of advertised requirements for executive positions in the fire service would then provide a simple but reliable and independent index of the penetration of the EFOP certificate within its target positions--especially when compared to other, more general and/or more traditional indices of preparation and performance such as college degrees or graduate education.

The qualifications of years of experience and a bachelors degree are shown to be requirements in advertised job announcements for chief fire officers by James A. Fisher in his research on whether the EFOP makes a difference (Fisher, 1997). Additionally, Fisher (1997) goes on to state that 27% of the fire chiefs hired in 1996 possessed EFOP credentials. It should be noted that the number of chief fire officer job announcements that listed EFOP participation or completion in 1996 as a qualification is not given. He goes on to imply that the number of EFOP participants hired is due to the participation of International City/County Manager Association (ICMA) members in National Fire Academy courses and activities.

Research by Leslie A. Albert confirms Fishers findings that chief fire officers should have a bachelors degree (Albert, 1997). Albert goes on to recommend that chief fire officers be required to have a major in Fire Administration, Public Administration, or

Business Management (Albert, 1997). His findings are based upon surveys from seventeen central Illinois fire departments.

In a survey distributed to 40 city managers, administrators and fire commissioners from California, Idaho, Oregon and Washington the qualifications for selecting a fire chief were obtained (Mason, 1997). The qualifications noted by the other researchers were found. Important qualifications were bachelors degrees with appropriate major and years of experience. He also identified the need to educate the respondents about the professional benefits of the EFOP (Mason, 1997). Also, in a limited study of chief fire officer qualifications in the Pacific Northwest, the recommendation of a minimum of a two year degree and mandatory participation in National Fire Chief's Certification Program are suggested (Hansen, 1996). He also recommends successful completion of the EFOP.

Type of college degree (Associate, Bachelor, Masters), EFOP participation, and length of work experience are cited as advertised qualifications for chief fire officers (Hill, 1996). These criteria were collected from hiring announcements over a two-year period between 1994 and 1996. Findings were that EFOP participation as a qualification was extremely low and having a bachelors degree was extremely high. The findings from 1994 in this study are used for comparison to the findings in this present research.

In summary, the literature reviewed supports the examination of advertised qualifications for chief fire officers as a means evaluated career and professional development. Additionally, review of EFOP participation, as a job qualification is one means to evaluate the identification of the importance of the EFOP program to management and administrative professionals.



## PROCEDURES

A one year sample of advertised openings for chief fire officers (Battalion Chief and above) was collected from the 1999 issues of International Association of Fire Chiefs *On Scene*, *Fire Chief* magazine and *Fire Engineering* magazine. Duplicated advertisements were identified and removed to yield a single data set for each position. Advertised qualifications were partitioned according to the following criteria:

1. Degree preference/requirement (Associates, Bachelors, Masters)
2. Major preference (Fire Science & Administration, Public Administration, Business Administration)
3. EFOP preference/requirement
4. Emergency Medical Services experience requirement
5. Experience requirement

These data were then tabulated and examined. This data was then compared to data obtained for 1994 by the same methods as outlined above.

A literature search was conducted through the Learning Center at the National Fire Academy. Additional literature was evaluated from the author's personnel library and the library at the SMFPD.

## RESULTS

A total of 94 positions were advertised during the interval of analysis. Executive Fire Officer Program completion or participation was mentioned in 21 (22.34%) of these positions, all were preferred. College degrees were mentioned in 82 (87.23%) of the positions advertised, including all positions preferring EFOP. Associates degree or higher was preferred or required in 16 (17.02% of total positions). Bachelors degree or higher

was preferred or required in 58 (61.70% of total positions). Masters degree was preferred or required in 8 (8.51% of total positions).

Major fields of study for degrees were analyzed. Fire Science or Fire Administration was mentioned 59 (71.9%) out of 82 total. Public Administration was mentioned 41 (50.0%) out of 82 total. Business Administration was mentioned 21 (25.6%) out of 82 total. No major was mentioned 14 (17.1%) out of 82 total. Many advertised positions mentioned more than one of the above majors.

A specific number of years experience in supervisory or command positions was required in 79 (84.04%) of the 94 total advertisements. The average number of years required was 7.7 years. The lowest number of years required was 3 and the highest was 15. Emergency medical service experience was mentioned in 42 (44.7%) out of 94 positions.

The data collected for 1994 (Hill, 1996) is shown in the following table (1). It was collected and analyzed identically to the data collected for 1999. The table also shows the data for 1999 and the changes between the two for the five-year period.

Table 1.

<b><u>Subject</u></b>	<b><u>1994</u></b>	<b><u>1999</u></b>	<b><u>Change</u></b>
Total Job Announcements	43	94	+51
EFOP mentioned	2 (4.65%)	21 (22.34%)	+17.69%
Degree required	38 (88.37%)	82 (87.23%)	-1.14%
Associates Degree	5 (11.63%)	16 (17.02%)	+5.39%
Bachelors Degree	30 (69.77%)	58 (61.70%)	-8.07%
Masters Degree	3 (6.97%)	8 (8.51%)	+1.54%
Years Experience			
Required	33 (76.74%)	79 (84.04%)	+7.30%
Average Experience			
Required	4.9 years	7.7 years	+2.8 years
Low	3 years	3 years	0
High	10 years	15 years	+ 5 years
EMS Experience			
Required	21 (48.8%)	42 (44.7%)	-4.1%

Answers to original research questions:

1. What are the commonly advertised qualifications for chief fire officers?

College degrees (Associate, Bachelor, Masters), fields of study (Fire Science and Fire Administration, Public Administration, Business Administration), supervisory or

command experience and emergency medical experience are commonly advertised qualifications for chief fire officers. They are shown in Table 1.

2. Have those qualifications changed in the last five years?

The qualifications have not changed but the percentages associated with them have. These changes are shown in Table 1.

3. Is the Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) completion or participation, as an advertised qualification for chief fire officers, changing?

EFOP completion or participation, as an advertised qualification for chief fire officers, has changed in the five years covered in the comparison. The percentage of the EFOP being preferred as a qualification has increased 17.69% as shown in Table 1.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study results are very similar to the results obtained by other researchers (Fisher, 1997; Mason, 1997; Hansen, 1996; Hill, 1996). They all have several if not all of the commonly advertised or desired qualifications for chief fire officers. All note other qualifications but these are normally mentioned to a lesser degree than the ones in this study. This study differs from the others identified in one important aspect. It shows an increase in the role of the EFOP as related to preferred qualifications for chief fire officers. The reason for this increase is not known but speculations can be made. The increase could be due to ICMA representatives becoming more familiar with the EFOP as recommended by Mason (1997) and Fisher (1997). EFOP graduates may be moving into roles of more influence within their respective agencies, thus not only promoting the EFOP but also making more of a positive impression on city managers and administrators.

Interpretation of the study results leads the author to believe that the core qualifications for the chief fire officer have not changed significantly in the past five years. The same commonly advertised qualifications are still being seen in job announcements. Chief fire officers should use them as a real world measure for planning career and professional development goals. By no means should they be seen as the only qualifications for a chief fire officer position. They are only objective measures that can be more easily quantified than other knowledge, skills and abilities that the chief fire officer should possess. However, having a Bachelors degree in Fire Science or Fire Administration with seven to eight years of supervisory or command experience, EMS experience and EFOP completion or participation should put the normal chief fire officer on the right track for career and professional development.

A statistical comparison to show any significance in the changes of the percentages associated with the various qualifications is beyond the abilities of the author, however, the data appears on the surface to be extremely close to what they were five years ago. The time period covered may be too short or the population too small to show any significant trends except with the possibility of the increase in the EFOP being preferred as a qualification.

There are two implications of the results to the SMFPD. The first is that the results show the organization what objective qualifications, based on what other organizations commonly mention, it should look for in chief fire officers. Secondly, the time and expense for employee participation in the EFOP program is justified. This is based on the increase in the mention of the EFOP as a preferred qualification in job

announcements. This is indicative that the EFOP program is gaining as an indicator of desirable qualifications for their employees to have.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Chief fire officers should as a minimum have a Bachelors degree in Fire Science, Fire Administration, Public Administration, or Business Administration.
2. Chief fire officers should have as a minimum seven to eight years of supervisory or command experience.
3. Chief fire officers should have experience or certificates in emergency medical services.
4. Chief fire officers should attend and graduate from the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy.

These recommendations will not only strengthen the individual fire agency but also the national fire service and the individual chief fire officer. They are a start in bringing about consensus concerning what qualifications a chief fire officer should possess in the national fire service and should help lead to more professionalism in the fire service. They will help to bring more recognition to the fire service as a true profession.

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